



ועידת התביעות
Claims Conference
Conference on Jewish Material Claims
Against Germany

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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Prologue

Hate: a word that speaks volumes in its four letters. Listen to it as you say it aloud. Does it resonate in your mind? What images does it conjure? Are they pleasant? No? Then come and hear my story of hate and love and devastation and survival. Perhaps, my words can help to light the darkness and serve as an important reminder that we all contain the roots of hate in our existence and only by understanding hate's nature can we hope to stave it from our lives.

Listen: in 1937 in the town of Baranowo in the old country of Poland, we see hate. Simple and destructive and as damning to those who are its originators as to those whose reactions can be nothing less than a feeling returned in kind. Can you see them? I can. All of these images are with me and coloring my world as I continue to walk through my life. My name is Mitchell Garwolinski and this is my story.

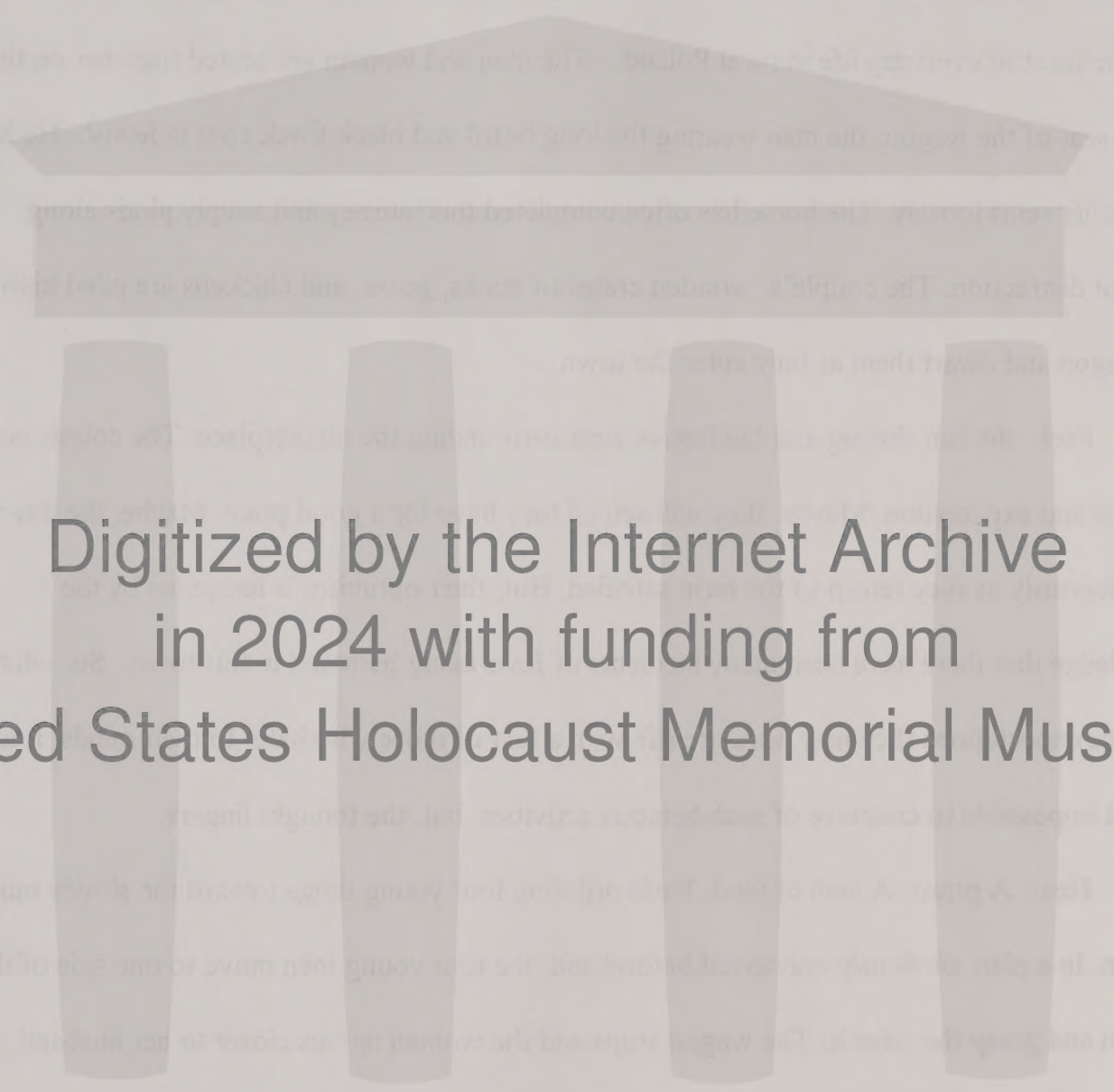
See: A teeming marketplace, whose few tables are filled with people from the area. All have come to continue their business. On this long-forgotten Monday in a place far away, an elderly couple are riding high on a wagon pulled by a single horse. The man guides the horse

through the narrow streets. The soft clip clop of its measured tread echoes from the buildings. But, this sound is soon lost in the noises emanating from the market. Nothing remarkable to see: just one facet of everyday life in rural Poland. The man and woman are seated together on the rough seat of the wagon: the man wearing the long beard and black frock coat is Jewish. He holds the leather reins loosely. The horse has often completed this journey and simply plods along without distraction. The couple's wooden crates of ducks, geese, and chickens are piled high on the wagon and dwarf them as they enter the town.

Feel: the sun shining and the festive aura surrounding the marketplace. The couple is full of hope and expectation. Maybe, they will sell all they have for a good price. Maybe, the day will end gloriously as they return to the farm satisfied. But, their optimism is tempered by the knowledge that there have been many incidents of Jews being harassed in this town. So, whatever positive expectations they may have are rife with a fear of those who hate. In their minds, it is almost impossible to conceive of such heinous activities: but, the thought lingers. . .

Hear: A priest. A man of God. He is ordering four young thugs toward the slowly moving wagon. In a plan, obviously conceived beforehand, the four young men move to one side of the wagon and grasp the wheels. The wagon stops and the woman moves closer to her husband. He says something to them, but his words are lost in the din coming from the marketplace. Grasping the wheels, the young men push the wagon up and over. It crashes to the ground.

The old man and woman are thrown to the hard ground and injured. Their cages tumble to the ground and break open. Birds are squawking and flying everywhere. The horse, now frightened beyond measure, bolts -- dragging the wagon along the cobblestone street, spilling the rest of its cargo. The four young men, not satisfied with their effort, begin to laugh derisively at



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the elderly couple laying in a heap on the road. From my perch in the window of my house, I watch as a brave onlooker runs to the horse and grasps the reins preventing it from dragging the wagon into the crowded marketplace and injuring more people. As the horse stops, the tension of the moment lessens.

Understand: My father moves behind me and looks at the scene. ‘Momma, there’s that priest again. What a hypocrite!’

“I know. He condemns the Jews and sends his maid to their store under cover of darkness because he will not deal with them personally.”

“Dad, what about the priest?” I asked.

“He ordered the men to do this.”

“Why?”

Silence: What can my father say? How can he explain hate to a five-year-old? What words can explain that which he does not understand himself. He does not answer but moves closer to the window as he recognizes his father, a formidable man moving to the pitifully sobbing woman. Her leg is hurt and my grandfather gently picks her up and carries her to the side of the road to rest. Seeing that she is comfortable for the moment, he returns to the street and assists the man and helps him to sit by his wife. The four young men, feeling their work was complete, melt into the crowd. The priest, his face glowering, moves toward my grandfather in a menacing manner. My grandfather, rises to his full height and stares at the priest. No words are exchanged but my grandfather’s communication is clear.

Watch: My father rushes from the window to the door and runs into the street. Not too many people would take a chance to go against my grandfather, especially the people who knew

him. He was tall, powerful, and fast. But, with the priest, there were five of them. My momma moves close to the window. She is trembling.

“Father Tszlaskoma, why?” My father asks.

The priest does not answer but searches the crowd furtively for the young men. Not seeing them, he begins to slow his advance. My father moves close to my grandfather, they stand together. The priest turns and walks away.

Some of the men from town gather alongside the wagon and right it once more. The birds, though not all of them, are gathered and placed in their cages and loaded on the wagon. I feel my mother's arm encircling me and drawing me close.

One more hate-inspired incident, in a long line of hate-inspired incidents, in a small Polish town in a time between the Great Wars. A small evil serving to prepare the soil for the for the seeds of the greatest evil ever known.

One

Europe, in 1939, was a place rife with conflict. Of course there were the larger conflicts between countries, but there were conflicts even more personal. Caught in the throes of a world-wide depression, tension abounded nearly everywhere. When there is not enough food to feed one's family, and even more importantly, when there are no means to procure such food: conflict becomes inevitable.

Whether it is the inherent jealousy between those who have sufficient food and shelter and those who do not, or the lack of perceived opportunity, these jealousies can generate their own problems. But, there is also the human need to place blame, for blame is the balm that eases the sores of need.

My father, who worked for the United States Government at that time, was fairly lucky. We lived a moderately comfortable life in the city of Baranowo. There were five in my family, my mother and father, little brother Andrew who was only a few weeks old, and my sister Irene. Irene was my best friend and I missed her sorely. She had gone to live with my aunt because my aunt had no children of her own and she felt badly about this. My mother, to ease her sister's pain,

offered to let Irene stay with her. Our house was sufficient for our needs, but the storms that assailed the world from its leaders to the least among us would not spare our small lives. It was a typical house of that region. Though we were on the outskirts of town, we had a small plot of land where we grew vegetables. We also had a barn where we kept a cow, a couple of goats, and some geese.

The radio in the living room crackled with static. I sat near my father, looked at the lighted round dial, and listened to the broadcast. It did not seem very important to me, as I was only seven years old. But, the gravity showing on my father's face was palpable, and the tension I felt in the room was real. The announcer, in tones touched with gravity, said that Germany had just attacked our country. "I don't like this. Perhaps, we should go to the United States." My father said aloud, but I knew his words were not for me. Instead, they were aimed directly at my mother.

I saw her face cloud over and she turned away. From my adult perspective, I understand why she did this. To her, war was unimportant. She was concerned with her family and our life together. War, while an inconvenience, should not have an effect on one simple Polish family trying to live their lives as best they can.

"I don't know. . ." She said. My father looked at her and smiled. He knew she was thinking of her sisters and parents who did not have that option.

"Well, if we cannot go to the United States, I think we should get out of the city."

"Where will we go?" My mother asked, emotion choking her voice.

"Let's go stay with your brother in Grabownica."

"I suppose we could. They might like the company and that certainly is far from the paths of war. Let me write him and ask."

Shortly after this, we loaded our possessions into a wagon and began the move to Grabownica. This was not unusual. A lot of people were moving out of the cities. Wars centered on the cities, not on the simple folks living deep in the country. I remember helping carry our possessions to the wagon where my father stacked them. Though I was young, I still helped. I looked at the street where I grew up and the house I lived in and felt sad. Leaving so much of my world behind was hard.

“What about Irene?”

“She is safe. We’ll let her know where we are so she can join us, if necessary.” My mother said, her voice cracking with emotion. I could tell she did not want to leave her friends and church behind. But, with two young boys, seeking a place of refuge from the coming war seemed a good idea.

The journey was accomplished with the accompaniment of others. The roads were filled with people moving from one place to another to escape the gathering storm. Now, I know we call such people refugees. But, when you are seven, such words are beyond your ken. Instead, you perceive that you are moving and others are moving as well -- so nothing seemed amiss.

When we finally arrived at Grabownica, I was happy. The town was a town in name only. In reality, it was nothing more than a collection of five houses deep in the midst of a large pine forest. There was a stream that served as the focal point of the settlement. The stream, through countless years, had carved a valley. In this place, all manner of fruit trees abounded. Wild berries and mushrooms grew everywhere. My memories of first seeing this place are wonderful. To me,

the land looked like something out of a painting I had seen in a museum. There was a clear stream and picturesque hills dotted by quaint houses

My father told me that because it was so far away from the cities, the people here pretty much took care of themselves. They kept all manner of livestock and farmed the rich soil. My father also explained that the option of returning to the United States was gone. The Germans were already bombing the cities and it was not safe to try to make it to the American Embassy in Warsaw.

When we arrived, we were warmly welcomed. I was glad to see my cousins, who were about the same age. Having someone to replace my sister was important, and we got along famously.

The work was hard, but honest. In the evening, after the day's work had been completed and supper finished, the people in the small community would gather and visit. And while telling stories and singing songs used to be the normal activities, of late, the talk had turned to war. And though we were far from the cities where the war was real and occurring, we could not ignore it.

It had been reported that the Germans had invaded Poland and were now moving nearer to our small town. We heard they were only forty kilometers away. This seemed a good distance to me, but with a mechanized army, it was not much more than a few hour's journey. The tension the men felt was clear. After listening to the talk one evening, my father asked my uncle, "Where do you think we could build a bomb shelter?"

"You think they will bomb here, Joseph?"

"No. I don't think so. But, they may move through the area and I want a place to go where I know my family will be safe. Besides, the Russians are moving in from the East. With the

Germans moving in from the West, we are caught in the middle. I think it would be better to have a place where we can go and be safe.

Again, from an adult perspective, I understand why my father wanted to complete this task. In a village this small, there was little for him to do. He wanted to feel useful and important. And though my father was helping with the farming, it was apparent to him that his help was not necessary. He wanted to do something that would be of use and a project that would give him a sense of contributing to the welfare of all.

The next morning, my uncle took my dad to a place deep in the forest. I went along. “What do you think of this, Joseph?”

“I don’t know. I would prefer it to be further from the road. Let’s look a little further.”

The three of us walked in the stillness of the deep woods until my father found a place more to his liking. It was similar to the other place, but there were a lot of young trees around which could be taken to use as camouflage for the structure.

It took my dad approximately three days to dig the hole for the shelter. He worked at it from sun up to sundown. Ten hours a day he dug in the floor of the forest till he had hollowed out a place large enough for us to hide.

Taking care to move farther away from the structure, he cut down tree after tree and made them into logs that would fit closely together to protect us. Dragging these logs through the dense forest was not easy and it took my father another three days to build the four walls and roof.

When the structure was completed, he covered it over with some of the dirt he had removed. It took about a week to build the shelter totally, and finally it was done.

Six

I have always been told that time is a constant and that it does not change as we go from day to day. But, in my experience, this is not true. Simply, there are times where we feel that time is slowed until it seems we are standing still. It is in these times that our perceptions are attenuated and we see not only what is happening at that particular moment, but things that have already happened, and sometimes, under very special circumstances, a future.

Is this future correct? I don't know. I have experienced many of these time anomalies in my lifetime and I cannot state unequivocally that they show with any certainty, the future. But, I am not one who will claim that their veracity is suspect. Perhaps, as we move through our lives, there are choices and events that affect these possible futures. All I know is that when we experience one of these times when time slows: it can have a devastating effect on our lives.

The months were continuing to pass us by and there still was no word of Irene. My mother was becoming increasingly agitated. She would often sit and cry at the window. Her sleep was troubled and she became more and more listless.

My father had harbored some hope that his father would send word about Irene. But, as the days passed into weeks and there was still no word: our hopes faded. Finally, my father in order to please my mom and himself, decided to risk the journey to see if he could find her.

On a nearly cloudless, cold, winter morning, he packed an old satchel with extra clothing and whatever food the family could spare, and went to the train station in Jastrzoabke. My father did not want to take me along. It was dangerous and he knew it. But, I ran ahead and waited for him on the road. Reluctantly, he took me with him. I suppose he relented because I was becoming more and more useful as a thief and a person whom others did not readily notice. Besides, a man and his son cause much less suspicion than a solitary man traveling.

We walked to the train station through the bleak landscape. On the rise of a hill just above the station, we saw a scene before us that is burned forever in my memory. They say that time is a constant, but it was not that day. Instead, the scene before us appeared no more than a bleak watercolor painting. As we gazed, it seemed that everyone and everything was locked into their positions as if they were afraid to move. It is a scene I will never forget.

As we stared at the still-life watercolor with its gauzy images displayed before us and tried to understand what we were seeing: our vision was disturbed by an approaching train as its mournful whistle ripped the sky. Its stack belched dark clouds into the still blue and white world, and its driving wheels beat out a mechanical background to the sterile scene.

As we stared, we noticed that there were Nazis lining the tracks. Spaced about thirty feet apart, they stood with their weapons ready. Some carried rifles and a few had automatic weapons; but, all were poised for action.

As the train entered the station, we could see that the train's cars, usually reserved for transporting livestock were filled with people. Even with a casual glance, I could see that these people looked no more than walking skeletons. They were so pale and thin their bones were clearly visible in their hands and faces as they pressed against the slats exposing them to the elements. I thought they looked like they were already dead and I wanted to avert my eyes: I did not. Instead, some force drew me to stare at this maudlin scene.

As the train came to a stop, I noticed that a board on the side of one of the cars had come loose. A young Jewish woman delicately pushed a small infant through the crack. Why she did this, I have never understood. What did she hope to accomplish? To this day I cannot say that I know with any certainty. I suppose if I had been her, I might have done the same. But, of this, I am less than sure. I understand it better now, but I still do not think I could have done what she did.

A German Soldier moved toward the baby where it lay crying on the white snow. I reached for my father and felt his strong arm on my shoulder as he pulled me close. The soldier stood over the baby with his weapon in a firing position. It looked as if he were readying the gun for firing, but my mind would not let me believe that anyone could do this. The mother managed to jump from the car, but landed wrong and fell in a heap. When she tried to get up and walk, it was obvious that her leg was broken. Disregarding the pain, she began moving toward the baby hopping on her good leg and dragging the other behind her. From my vantage point, I could see the panic and hatred in her eyes. The soldier's upper lip twitched as he walked close to the infant, lowered his rifle to the baby's head, looked the other way, and squeezed the trigger.

The mother's scream ripped from her heart as she limped pitifully toward the soldier. As the seconds passed, I could tell she was cursing him as strongly as I have ever heard anyone curse another. As I stared, I realized that she looked like she was on the verge of death as she staggered to her dead baby.

Helplessly, with tears streaming, she told the soldier that his time was coming. With no expression whatsoever, the soldier, raised his weapon to her head, and pulled the trigger again and again.

With each retort of the rifle, an involuntary spasm rocked my body. These visions are still with me. I cannot loose them from my consciousness. They have become part of me and damn them for that. It was at that moment I learned that hate is not always a bad word. Sometimes, hate is necessary to understand that which cannot be understood without the benefit of this lens to sharpen our focus.

I heard my father cry, "Oh, my God." I looked at him. His face was pale and he clenched his fists time and again. I turned my head toward him, clung closely, and let my tears fall.

Twenty-six

When I was in the back of that truck, I did not talk. I simply sat and massaged my throat. I was having difficulty breathing and rubbing it seemed to help. My thoughts at this time were dark. I did not know what was going to happen, but my fear was real. I had been in a labor camp, they were without virtue. I had no idea of how terrible this one would be, or I might have leapt from the truck and died.

I was taken to a small labor camp and directed to a barracks for confinement. The German guard looked at me and then read a note that someone had written on a piece of paper. In broken Polish he said, "Because you have escaped before, you will not be allowed the privilege of shoes or even a shirt. If you try to escape this time, you will be killed. In the most unpleasant way we can think of." He looked at me for an answer, but what could I say? I said nothing.

Every day they woke us and we were taken to the fields where we dug trenches and foxholes for the Nazis. It was clear from this activity that they had no intention of leaving our area peacefully.

It seemed a shame to tear up farmers' fields while they were trying to grow wheat and potatoes, but we had no choice. Working in the fields digging, without shoes, was hard on my

feet. Day after day they got worse until they were bleeding nearly all of the time. They hurt terribly, but I had no choice. I continued working no matter how much pain I was in. The Nazis did not suffer that anyone not work. The alternative was a sure and swift death. Each day became a new experience in agony.

Because the ground was hard, we used picks and shovels to dig the holes. It was extremely difficult work for a young boy. I was so tired, by the end of the day, that I could not imagine doing the same thing the next day. As I lay on my pallet, a simple board without covers or mattress, I prayed for my deliverance and the safety of my family. At least at first, toward the end of my confinement, I simply wished for death.

We were continually exhausted from working. The Nazis continued to be cruel taskmasters. They would beat us for no reason in particular. I think they simply liked doing it. For example, if one of the boys stretched his body to relieve his aching muscles, the whip would strike him mercilessly. And this whip was a huge braided leather whip used for horses. The sound of that whip shrieking through the air with the snap when it hit, is with me always. I remember watching the whip strike the boys and seeing the welt form immediately. Because we all had been whipped so often, more times than not the whip opened old sores and the blood would spatter with the contact. It was dreadful.

Though most of the guards were German nationals, there were a few Ukrainian men who had endeared themselves to the Germans. Over my group was a particularly nasty man named Ivan. Ivan was a terrible, sadistic person. He would whip us severely for no reason whatsoever. And the smile on his face as he did it was simply ghastly. I know now that men like this are called sadists. They derive satisfaction from being cruel. At that time I did not understand such things

and only knew that he was a nasty man who enjoyed his position of power, and had a particular dislike for me.

When he was not whipping us, he would tease us endlessly. While we were working, he would pick up clods of dirt or stones and hit us with them. Not a gentle, playful hit: but he threw them with such authority that they hurt terribly. When we turned to see who had done such a thing, he would laugh loudly and smile at us. His smile was dreadful

Most of the beatings I received, and there were many, were done for his amusement and not for punishment. We understood what was expected of us and we did our best to comply. To Ivan, it made little difference. He would simply begin whipping us without mercy and smile that dreadful smile and laugh at us writhing in pain.

I felt thoroughly insulted and degraded, but the intense pain masked the mental agony. If I made him a little angry and avoided him, he would run to me and place a few kicks in my stomach while screaming vulgar obscenities and calling me a worthless swine. Since I didn't have any clothes on except for some torn shorts he would grab me by the testicles and squeeze as hard as he could all the while giggling and laughing. My screams from these violations echoed in the stillness, but died on the winds of indifference. I learned to hate him and wish for some sort of revenge.

The pain I felt was constant. My body ached from the work. My feet were constantly swollen and bleeding. My skin was unprotected from the elements and the rain and heat and sun had done much damage.

Because I was in such pain, my sense of humor which I had used many times for self-defense failed me. Try as I might, I could find no humor in this situation. I was nearly naked,

worked like an animal, and punished mercilessly. I felt I was reaching the end of my ability to survive. I had never experienced such desolation of the soul before. Honestly, I began to believe that it would be better to just lay down and die. I simply cannot tell you how dreadful this experience was: words fail me.

There are no words that can describe such base humiliation and pain. It really and truly is something that must be experienced to be understood. This was far worse than anything I had ever experienced before. Even when I was in the work camp before, we worked hard but were not constantly punished and assaulted.

Every movement, every time I walked: the pain assaulted me. I felt completely helpless and pleasant thoughts of suicide entered my mind. The silent screams returned. Oddly enough, these helped some. I did not make a noise, but in my mind I cried to my Lord for deliverance. I screamed the desolate silent scream of agony.

Some of the prisoners dreamed about food, loved ones, and their parents. I did too, but I also dreamed of exacting revenge on the sadistic Ivan. The thought went through my mind often asking how much I can endure, if this keeps up. I believed that I would either go insane or die: there simply were not many choices.

But, as the silent screams of agony helped, so did the fantasy of revenge on Ivan. I imagined doing all sorts of cruel things to this man. A cruelty for every time he was cruel to me. The thought began to consume me. Even while I was working and the whip was whistling, I would imagine what it would feel like to hurt him.

I also dreamed of escaping. But, with no shoes or clothes and the guards watching us closely, this seemed impossible. The Russian planes and the fighters would fly overhead and we

chanced a glance at them while we worked. I think I might have even prayed that they attack us. At least if they did that, in the confusion I might be able to get away. If I survived the bombs. But, I was in such misery that this seemed to be of little importance as well.

By now, my mind had deteriorated to the point where nearly every thought was either of dying or revenge. I still live on, after a fashion, and I am grateful to God for this. I feel like I am still living, but somehow dead. I pray for the miracle that will rescue me from this dreadful purgatory of the soul, for all I know is extreme misery and severe depression.

One day as guards marched us to dig a bunker, we were mixed with the older prisoners to help cut down trees to line the bunkers we had dug. The older prisoners were given the task of actually felling the trees, the boys were set to the task of removing the branches. After the men had prepared enough logs for the bunker, we started digging the bunker.

We heard that the Russians were beating the Germans and they were getting closer. We also heard bits and pieces about the Warsaw uprising. Russian planes were bombing Germany almost every day and we did not see many German planes flying. Someone said they were running out of gasoline. These rumors and thoughts of misery befalling our enemies, encouraged us slightly. It did not help our situation immediately, but it did give us hope for the future. Something that had been missing for a long time.

As the sun was beginning to set and our quitting time was near, I was so tired that I stretched my body to relieve the agony. Almost immediately I felt the whip strike me terribly. The pain I felt inflamed me and I turned to see who had struck me. It was Ivan, smiling widely and laughing.

He moved closer to me and kicked me as hard as he could in the stomach. I fell to the

ground. My hand chanced upon a sharpened stick. I smiled grimly as I felt my fingers close around the broken wood.

When Ivan bent over to grab my testicles, I mustered enough strength to get up half way with the stick in my right hand. Looking at him with total hatred in my mind, I took the stick and thrust it deep into his eye. I pushed it in as far as I could. I felt it ease through the eye and then encounter something hard. I let it go as he began howling and screaming. I watched him as he danced about screaming and trying to pull the stick out of his eye. I smiled as I saw the blood running down his face..

My instinct for survival told me to run; there were only two German guards with guns and they were on the other end of the field. I ran as fast as I could downhill. My heart was beating rapidly and I felt an adrenalin rush as I ran. The adrenalin helped to ease the pain and I ran faster and faster.

When I heard the gunshots, I ran even faster. I was scared, but I knew that the guards couldn't leave the other inmates because they would run away. I didn't stop running until I came to a small farm house. I saw some clothes hanging out to dry, and helped myself to a pair of pants and a shirt. I kept running through the alleys of the town until I reached the other side where there was a small patch of trees just before the river. I stopped and looked behind me to see if I was being followed. When I was sure I wasn't, I put the pants on. They were were too long and too large around the waist. But, there was a tear-hole in the knee of the pants so I started to begin ripping the material, starting at the hole and around the pant leg. I made the pants shorter and put them on. I found a piece of vine to use for a belt and put on the shirt and stuffed the excess into the pants.

The vision of Ivan, with the stick protruding from his eye, formed in my mind as I walked. I have wrestled with this incident in my mind many times. I finally have justified the incident by calling it self-defense. If I had stayed, I am certain that I would have died like many others. I chose to survive. A decision I have never regretted.

Thirty-one

Finding my bed, I lay down and tried to think. There had to be something good in this situation, but for the life of me I could not imagine what it was. The blonde guard outside our door, was a handsome young man full of youth and comely appearance. But, I later found out he was one of the chief sadists they called “enforcers.”

The first couple of days were not as terrible as those that followed. At first we were allowed to use the restroom when we needed and had the freedom to walk to a cafeteria for our meager portions of food. This was at first. The loss of this freedom started gradually.

The blonde guard and a woman with rough features named Helga, would place us in our beds and restrain us for the doctors. The restraints were tightened on our wrists and ankles and a strap was placed across our chests and made secure. When we were completely immobilized, the doctors would approach us with a hypodermic needle full of something and inject us -- without saying a word. It seemed to me, that they did not even think of us as patients, or even humans: but, simply subjects. They did not always inject us, sometimes they took a scalpel and cut the vein and collected the blood in tubes. I know that some bled to death during these procedures. I heard their dying screams.

Helga stood behind the doctors with a medical chart in her hand and took notes. It was a dreadful time for me. Each new day brought on some loss of both my sense of identity and my viability as a person. I was weak and sick and getting sicker.

In the midst of this, Helga would smile at me once in a while. I think she liked me, she gave me more bread and watery soup than the others. I guess I appreciated it. But, it seemed to be of little import.

I knew that I was getting much more than the Jewish kids but, I could not do anything about that. I could see them in distance, when the door was opened, and they were doing dreadfully. It did not take a person experienced in the medical arts to tell, at a glance, that they were very sick. I recognized the signs of typhoid fever and other diseases. The very sick in our room and the adjoining rooms moaned and cried nearly constantly. No matter how ill they became, they were denied even the most primitive care and in a short time were dying. As I watched all that went on around me, I came to the conclusion that all of us will die: either from their medical “experiments” or from the abuse they regularly subjected us to.

These injections were daily occurrences. These shots made us so weak that I doubt I could have risen even if I had not been restrained. I could hear the other children crying, screaming, and moaning. I could not stop myself, though I tried not to, I cried with them.

Every day now, one of the prisoners hanged themselves. I was weary of seeing people dying. No matter how much I saw of it, I never got used to it. Hunger forced the inmates to try to escape. When they did, the machine guns would erupt and they would die. I was told the man who did the shooting was rewarded with a couple of days off. It was hell on earth.

I wasn't feeling well; sometimes I couldn't stop shaking. I guess this was from the injections, but there was so much disease in this place I could not be sure. My mental abilities were deteriorating as well. I was barely coherent at times. Other times, I think I was completely lost. I honestly cannot remember. Whole days I spent in this place have been wiped from my memory.

Physically I was ill, but the mental tiredness was something that I could not deal with. Between the crying and moaning, the injections and the sickness, I was getting to the point of complete mental exhaustion. Human suffering inside this barbed wire camp became an every day affair. My life at this time in this camp had no meaning to me. I was at the point of not caring if I lived or died. I felt as though my Lord had abandoned me, and I really needed his help.

All that I wanted was a small shade of hope. I was trying desperately to hold onto whatever small amount of faith in the future and the goodness of God I had left. But, it was extremely difficult. I can remember promising the Lord in prayer that if he would only lessen my pain, I would become a much better person. I was so desperate that I asked God if pain was my only reason for being born. While I prayed, I was so focused in my prayer and requests to God that I did not realize that, in spite of the straps restraining me, I had loosed them and was on my knees praying as my mother had taught me. But, this was an illusion as well. I remained tightly restrained and subject to the whims of my captors.

When I was in the midst of this, Helga would begin to visit me without the other guard or the doctors. She would approach the bed with her eyes smiling mischievously. At first she would do nothing but look at me. But, one day she removed the sheet covering my nakedness and began molesting me. Without a word, she began fondling me until I was hard. She would continue her

manipulations until I ejaculated. I had never experienced this before and I felt that I was being hurt physically and I knew this was wrong -- morally wrong and a grievous sin.

The situation was hopeless for me. Not only were the doctors doing their worst, this woman would come smiling and commit a form of rape on my restrained body. Apparently she liked this as she started coming to me two or three times a day. I screamed when she came, but she would place her hand over my mouth or place the pillow there to silence my screams all the while saying, "Shhhh."

Every day that passed, I remembered less of my former life. I think this was because of the drugs. For some reason I thought my eyesight was also failing. At night the light of the powerful spotlight would swing through the window. I could hear the terrifying screams of some poor soul who was being taken to surgery for experiments. Their voices, full of pain and terror, echoed in the stillness of the compound.

Though I lost track of time, the days continued to pass. The children who were held in this hospital were in a bad situation and every day it seemed to worsen. We were now so disease-ridden, that even the guards would not venture into the room without wearing gloves and surgical masks. A lot of us were dying; every day some were being transported to universities and more were simply removed from the room.

As I had been told, those who were very close to death would have the bottom of his foot sliced by either a doctor or the enforcer ; then he would be pulled to the end of the bed so his foot would hang over the bucket they placed at the end of the bed. They would then quietly bleed to death.

Outside of this building there was a huge shallow dumpster, and every day they carried the kids who had died or were dying and threw them in the dumpster. Some of the kids were still alive when they were thrown into the dumpster. The SS men would climb into the dumpster and step on their necks, kick their heads, or stomp on their ribs with their boots until they stopped moving. At the end of the day, a tractor came and hauled the dumpster away to be emptied. I witnessed these things through an open door.

The seasons continued their progression and it was getting very cold out now. The blonde enforcer would leave the windows open so that it was deathly cold in the room. We were all freezing. Those of us in precarious health would develop pneumonia. Some died nearly every night.

Apparently they had nearly exhausted their store of diseases to inject us with because the focus of their experiments changed. They would take us into a darkened room and leave us there. After several hours passed, they would come in and quickly examine our eyes. I am not sure what they were looking for, I only know that the light the doctors used hurt my eyes terribly.

Sometimes when we were placed in the dark room, the temperature would begin dropping. I was so cold that I believed I would never get warm. I tried to keep myself awake, but eventually I would succumb, as we all did, and pass out. After we were all unconscious, they would remove us from the room and bring us to consciousness. It was a terrible torture and there was nothing we could do about it. Well, there was one thing, but I was not yet ready to die.

In the distance, I could still hear things. I could hear the machine guns spitting death into the night. Once, from my room, I saw a man nearly cut in half by the hail of machine gun bullets

as he tried to make for the wall surrounding this place. I don't believe he wanted to escape. I believe he wanted to die.

I also can recall hearing bombing; maybe it was the Russian planes bombing targets almost every day. It seemed as though the bombs were falling close to the compound. But, they did not hit the compound for some reason. I used to pray that the bombers would bomb this camp.

They fed us poorly. Our food consisted of a small piece of crusty bread and some watery soup. I was so hungry that I could eat it in seconds. They did not give us utensils to eat with, instead I would eat the bread and drink the soup. If there was a remaining clump of something in the bottom of the soup bowl, I would scoop it up with my fingers. Someone said that sometimes the soup was made from ground human bones. I did not know if this were true, but I knew that things were changing within me. I had nearly lost my appetite, I was drugged most of the time, and I was in constant pain. As sick as I was, I tried my best to eat and pretend that I was fine. The alternative was the man cutting your foot with the scalpel and bleeding to death. I did not want to end up in that terrible dumpster: I pretended that everything was fine.

The next morning, I was awakened by the sounds of dogs growling and barking madly. I turned my head toward the open door and saw a sight I can never forget. A Jewish man, I did not know his name but remembered him because he had given me extra food in the cafeteria area when I first arrived at the compound, was on the ground and the blonde SS guard was kicking him repeatedly. The man's crime was to try to take some of the food the dogs had left in their dishes. The blonde man was cursing him and kicking him viciously. When the man passed out, the enforcer released the dogs. They attacked the man wildly. Ripping pieces of his flesh from his body and eating them. The dogs were getting more and more brutal and finally one of them ripped

the man's throat open and he began bleeding wildly. Blood was spurting everywhere and the dogs were licking it up as fast as it came. I started shaking in my bed. I felt so sorry for the man, he seemed to be a decent fellow. His crime of being hungry was not worthy of this brutal death.

The silent screams came again. They were with me nearly constantly now. I tried to think that it was God's will that this man was killed in such a manner. But if God intended to end this man's suffering, why did it have to be in such a terrible way? I had no answers.

I knew that only a few of us who had come on the transport were left alive. But, every day new children were brought to take their places. Though most of my contemporaries were dead, the population of victims in this camp was increasing.

Half groggy and confused, I dozed off when night came. The next thing I remember was when I felt my legs being pulled toward the end of the bed. I saw the blonde guard coming toward me with a scalpel and dragging a bucket. I watched to see if he would go to some other bed, he did not. When he viciously sliced the bottom of my left foot, I knew that my time was up. I did not want to die here. My family would not even know where I was buried. I forced a smile and looked at the man, his face was expressionless and he showed no emotion. When he left, I began to pray harder than I ever had.

Thirty-two

After I was done praying, I tried to think of a way to get loose. My hands were restrained by leather cuffs to the sides of the bed so I began thrashing around wildly in hope of loosening the bonds restraining me. I knew I did not want to die like this. If I had to die, I wanted to die for something. But, all of my thrashing only served to accelerate the blood flow from my foot. The bottom of my left foot felt warm and the blood drained out of me faster.

I was silently screaming in my mind and doing everything I could to get loose. Suddenly there was the sound of many explosions. These explosions were not in the distance, they were right here. The building rocked wildly in response to the blasts. In between the explosions, I heard the sounds of automatic gunfire. At this moment the door to my room burst open, and Helga came running in carrying a big knife and a bag.

She took the knife and quickly cut the straps that were holding my feet. She reached into the bag and retrieved a long white rag and wrapped it around my left foot tightly. Moving up the bed she cut the remaining straps holding me in bed. Without communicating, she retrieved a pair of pants and warm jacket from the bag. She put the pants on me and tightened a belt to hold them up because they were too large. Retrieving a pair of boots, she forced my feet into them and

helped me from the bed.

When I stepped on the floor I could hardly move. She pulled me along to the open door. We stopped at the doorway and looked. I could see that one of the buildings was on fire. The watchtower with the searchlight had been knocked down and people were running everywhere. Everyone was searching for a place of shelter away from the hail of bullets. The camp was in chaos. Helga thought for a moment and then pulled me along.

She looked toward the main gate which lay in ruins because of the bombs and headed that way. The thick bars of the gate were twisted and wrecked. They looked like pretzels in the wan half-light coming from the rising sun and the remains of the light fixtures. I knew she was trying to run to the trees, but I was slowing her down. I felt badly about this.

We continued moving toward the gate and when we were almost there, the blonde guard started yelling, "Halt! Halt! Or I will shoot." We did not stop, but kept moving as quickly as we could toward the gate and the forest beyond. He took his pistol and began firing toward us. Helga was hit and fell to the ground. She screamed, "Keep going, Mitch, you can make it!" The blonde SS man took his gun and leveled it at me. At that moment an army vehicle was backing up really fast and ran him over. His gun fired wildly into the air as he was crushed.

I kept moving as best that I could. I entered the forest and tried to get as far away from that camp as I could. By the time I was clear of the compound, the sun had risen. As I slowly walked through the forest, I thought, "This is a beautiful sunny day." But it was cold. The good thing was that after walking for a while, I felt my appetite return. If only I would have had something to eat

While I was in that camp, I had completely lost track of time. I did not even know what month it was. I knew it was nearly winter when I entered. Even more importantly, I had no idea of where I was. I felt I should go East, but I did not know why. I was still disoriented from the drugs and it seemed a good direction. Perhaps I could meet up with the invading Russian Army this way.

There were some narrow paths in the forest that I followed. When I was going down a hill, I saw a small stream up ahead. As I was very thirsty, I made for the stream. I looked around when I came to the opening just to make sure it was safe. When I saw nothing, I drank my fill of the cold, clear water. It was wonderful.

I walked for hours trying my best to keep away from the main roads where I might meet the German Army. Sometimes, I would come out to the edge of the forest to see if there was a house or a farm located nearby. I did not know if I was in Russia, Poland or Germany. This information would have helped me decide what to do.

The longer I walked, the slower I moved. Sometimes I could see Russian Fighters come down to look for the Germans. When they did not see them, they flew higher and continued their search. I followed the stream for as long as I could. But, the path was moving away from the stream and I ventured to the water to get one more drink. I sat on a big log and tried to think. I was sick, tired, lost, and hungry. I was trying desperately to place my hand in God's, hoping for his guidance. In my situation, I knew I needed a miracle to survive.

I was so cold that I was shivering uncontrollably. It seemed like I had been sleepwalking away from the camp. When I had started into the woods, the ground was red with my blood wherever I stepped. I was afraid that I would bleed to death. Now, I was afraid of dying from

exposure.

My thoughts shifted to the bombing of the camp. It was a good thing that it was destroyed, but I felt badly about Helga. Though I had learned to hate her, she had given her life so that I might escape. That was an important and selfless thing to do. I simply could not understand why she did this -- though I was grateful that she had. But, her actions helped to restore my faith in human beings: at least a little.

Her action also helped me to have the will to survive. It did not seem fair of me not to try my hardest considering that she had died giving me the chance. It was soon cold and dark but I kept moving. I needed food badly, and I needed shelter. I knew that without one or the other, this was probably my last night.

I did see a rabbit a couple of times, but I was in no shape to try and catch one. I looked for edible roots, but could find none. I did not see any fish in the stream, though I believed they were there. But, again, I had no way of catching them. I also remembered that there were wild boars in the woods of Poland, if that is where I was. I honestly did not know.

My situation was desperate and becoming more so. Yet, I was happy that I was free, particularly when I considered the alternative -- helplessly restrained and bleeding to death. I kept walking slowly. I had noticed, some time ago, that the cut on my foot had stopped bleeding. But, it was nearly dark and I needed shelter as food was out of the question at this time. I was simply too weak to look for any.

I went down to the stream and got another drink, just as I was just rising from the water, I saw some haystacks in a small valley ahead of me. I was excited. Where there were haystacks, there was a farm! I thanked God and kept moving my feet toward the haystacks. I knew that the

haystack would provide some shelter, if I could only get there. I got close to the first one when I saw a house in the distance with smoke coming out of the chimney. However, I did not know if I was in Poland or Germany and because of this, I did not want to venture to the house at night. I burrowed into the hay as deeply as I could and pulled the hay around me. Before I allowed myself to go to sleep, I thanked God for sparing my life once again. I thought about my parents and my family as I prayed. I fell asleep.

My shivering woke me near morning. As I was trying to get myself reoriented, I remembered the house from the night before. I wanted to go there but I was not sure if it was Polish or German. I figured that I would listen to see if they had a dog. If they had a dog, it was not a Polish house. Polish people were not allowed to keep dogs anymore.

I moved out of the hay. I wanted to sit and look at my foot, but I did not. It was too dark to see and the snow was falling. It was simply not the right time or place to worry about it. I was still cold and weak and crawled back into the haystack to rest a while. I fell asleep again.

The next time I woke, I moved out of the haystack and there were three men standing there. They were dressed in civilian clothes and one of them said, "What have we here? Come out, come out, boy." The fact that his words were in Polish set my heart soaring.

When I moved completely out of the haystack, I stumbled and fell. One of the men helped me up, "I'm sorry, I'm pretty weak. The Germans cut my foot."

"We know, we know. You were very lucky." The man said. "And we know all about the Germans."

"Who are you?"

"I am Captain and this is my sergeant and private."

I looked at them. The fact that they did not offer their names was not surprising. In this crazy war, the less information that you knew, the better off you were. I knew this. I looked at them. The man introduced as Captain looked Polish, the other two looked Jewish. "Am I in Poland?" I asked.

"Yes"

"I need to get to Barnowo, near Ostrleka."

"I know of these places," he said as he gestured, "But, you're not in any shape to travel. Come here and let me take a look at your foot. It looks extremely painful."

They helped me to my feet, one of the Jewish men picked me up and carried me back into the forest where there more men waiting. They then proceeded to carry me deeper into the woods. It was not that hard a task, I was nothing but skin and bones. They brought me to an underground bunker and we went inside. He carried me down the stairs and placed me gently on a chair.

